

Melvin Van Prolific: Melvin Van Prolific

By A. H. WEILER

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MOST Broadway hits wind up on the screen sooner or later—mostly later, that being the ordinary order of things. However, there doesn't seem to be anything at all ordinary about Melvin Van Peebles, so why should we be surprised to learn that Van Peebles's new and successful musical, "Don't Play Us Cheap!," was safely locked away on film before the show reached Broadway?

The protean Van Peebles, whose life has been a cyclone of activity since his filmmaking debut with "Story of a Three-Day Pass" in 1967, whizzed by the other day, pausing only long enough to catalogue his latest clutch of projects. In the process he confided that the film of "Don't Play Us Cheap!," for which he wrote the (Continued on Page 14)

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book, music and lyrics and served as director, "was shot without fanfare in Santa Fe, N.M., with the same cast we're using on Broadway."

The show was filmed in less than eight weeks for an unspecified sum, put up by Van Peebles's own company, Yeah, Inc., with the cast arriving in New York to begin stage rehearsals only two days after the camera stopped grinding in New Mexico. For Van Peebles, the film project was an ideal way to kill two birds with one stone. First, intensive work on the movie, in the relative isolation of the Santa Fe location, helped the cast achieve what Van Peebles felt was a highly desirable ensemble unity—the better to play a group of friends and neighbors at a riotous Harlem party.

Second, of course, was the chance to exercise complete control over the film under ideal conditions, and complete control is one of Van Peebles's specialties. He'll be doing the same on "The True American," his next film, which he says "is in the tradition of 'Don't Play Us Cheap!' It's a social comedy about the human condition, again in pseudo-fantasy style, about two guys—one black and one white—who plot an escape from hell. What happens to them when they make it back to earth will, I hope, be funny and satirical."

There's no production date set for "The True American," but Van Peebles made it clear he'll be his own man in most sectors of the filming. He's also planning a Western, as yet untitled, which he describes as a "social parody, with blacks doing the standard Western shtick." Still another upcoming Van Peebles project is his sequel to last year's talked-about film, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." And in case he runs out of things to do, there's always his other Broadway show, "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death," waiting its turn to go before the cameras. Now as for his spare time . . .

'COUPLES' COUPLE

Whatever became of "Couples"? Well, John Updike's best-selling novel about the involvements—mostly sexual—of several New England couples, a movie project at United Artists since 1968, finally will be filmed by a pair of TV's most prestigious producers,

Aaron Spelling and Leon Goldberg. They've teamed with Robert Mirisch to film it in California this summer. No cast yet, but they've signed John Llewellyn Moxey, also a video veteran, to make his movie directorial debut with it. He'll be working from a script by Elinor and Stephen Karpf.

Spelling and Goldberg have also acquired the rights to "The Sunshine Soldiers," Peter Tauber's book, published last year, about the life of a trainee in the Army Reserve. William Blinn, who recently won an Emmy for his script of the Emmy-winning "Brian's Song," will do the adaptation, with filming scheduled to start in late summer.

PENN'S PLANS

List as a man very much in demand but not yet behind the camera, director Arthur Penn, of "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Alice's Restaurant" fame, Penn has signed with Columbia to guide a comedy, "The Man Who Invented a Wife." Lawrence B. Marcus is about to write the script from his own story,

which, Penn reveals, concerns "an Italian who, for financial reasons, has 'invented' a wife and the invention he resorts to when he's finally asked to produce her."

"The Man Who Invented a Wife" joins several other projects on the Penn docket, among them "Sea Changes" and "Ruby Red." Which comes first? "It all depends on the scripts and which can be done first" says Penn. In any case, we hope Penn moves swiftly—it's been too long since his last invention, "Little Big Man."

SELECTED SHORTS

Author James Baldwin will make his movie directorial debut guiding Diana Sands through "The Inheritance," based on Baldwin's own screenplay. . . . Billie Whitelaw will cheat with Laurence Harvey behind Elizabeth Taylor's back in "Night Watch" . . . Clint Eastwood will direct William Holden in "Breezy." . . . Paul Sorvino, acclaimed Off Broadway in "That Championship Season," will join Glenda Jackson and George Segal in "A Touch of Class."